Youth Initiatives Project

Evaluation

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Youth Initiatives Project began to take shape in the late spring and early summer of 2001, with funding support from the Hamilton Community Foundation. Developed in response to an identified need, the initiative resulted in *The Square*, a safe place for young people (aged 12 to 18) to congregate and socialize.

Located on the southwest corner of the Eastgate Square parking lot, *The Square* occupied sixty by ninety feet of fenced in space, furnished primarily through donations from local area businesses, individuals, and community groups. *The Square* was open to youth on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights from 8:00pm to 12:00am, and operated over a six-week period from mid July to the end of August.

More than a successful response to the needs of area youth, the Youth Square initiative provides an encouraging example of how community needs can be addressed through a process of bringing community partners and resources together. Facilitated by a project coordinator, the initiative was planned and implemented by a steering committee of volunteers, with representatives from Hamilton Police Service, the public, private and non-profit sectors and community residents including youth themselves. A collaborative planning process ensured that the final product, *The Square*, would meet the needs of young people in a way that was acceptable and inviting to them.

This report provides an overview and evaluation of the Youth Initiatives Project, produced by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC).

The evaluation is based on six goals identified by the project steering committee early in the process. These goals were stated as follows:

1. **To provide a safe, violence-free, drug-free place for youth to meet**

2. **To integrate youth into all parts of the planning and implementation process**

3. **To foster new partnerships and to seek out and collaborate with existing youth serving groups in the public, private and non-profit sectors**

4. **To facilitate youth leadership development**

5. **To evaluate and disseminate learning's from this project; and**

6. **To investigate the long-term needs of East Hamilton youth.**

For the purpose of our analysis, this set of goals will be arranged under three categories, including meeting an identified need (goal 1), increasing community capacity (goals 2 through 5), and investigating long-term needs (goal 6). Following is an overview of the evaluation plan.

2.0 EVALUATING THE YOUTH INITIATIVES PROJECT

Consistent with the project goals developed by the steering committee, the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC) was contracted by the Hamilton Community Foundation to evaluate the success of the project. The evaluation plan was simple and exploratory in nature, involving three methods of gathering information. Researchers engaged in participant observation, key informant interviews, and a records review. The following sections provide descriptions of each of these methods.

2.1 Talking with Youth at the Square (participant observation)

A researcher from the SPRC visited *The Square* on three separate occasions, engaging in unstructured conversation with participants and volunteers. This approach provided an opportunity to gather information and insights from participants, related to their perceptions and experiences with the project. Such conversations were struck with approximately 40 participants, either individually or in small groups.

2.2 Talking to Supporters and Sponsors of the Square (key informant interviews)

One-on-one interviews were conducted with four individuals identified as supporters or sponsors of the project. This gave our researcher an opportunity to gather feedback and general impressions related to the their participation in the project, as well as the success of project goals. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Hamilton Police Services, Tim Hortons, Eastgate Square Mall, and Hamilton East Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club.

2.3 Records Review

A review of minutes taken during steering committee meeting, written correspondence between community partners and other records provided the researcher with a sense of the history and development of the project. This was valuable in identifying the key players or partners in the project, types of support and contributions provided, and how partners were brought together.

The following sections combine information from all sources to determine the success in meeting the project goals.

3.0 DID THE PROJECT MEET AN IDENTIFIED NEED?

3.1 Identifying the Needs of Area Youth

Prior to partners coming together as part of the Youth Initiatives Project, various stakeholders in the community were already in the process of understanding the needs of older youth (ages from approximately 9 to 19) in the area.

Most prominently, constables Dave Ingrassia and Denise Lanthier of the Stoney Creek Patrol Office had developed a report entitled Our Futures: Voices of Today's Youth. The report was based on the experiences of the officers in their dealings with area youth. During the summer of 2000, the officers responded to approximately twenty-three calls involving "disorderlies". The term disorderlies, in these cases, represented groups of teens congregating in parking lots, malls, coffee shops, and parks. In most of these cases, the teens were doing nothing more than outstaying their welcome. However, this was a concern for business owners and residents who feared that these groups would cause problems or make other patrons feel uncomfortable.

The main message from the youth was that they wanted a place to go, outdoors, where they would not be moved along by police, business owners, or neighborhood residents.

Seeing many of the same individuals congregating, and knowing they had few alternatives, the officers began a dialogue with area youth. The main message from the youth was that they wanted a place to go, outdoors, where they would not be moved along by police, business owners, or neighborhood residents.

This and other insights and ideas collected from the youth were documented in the officers' report.

During the spring of 2001, as Constables Ingrassia and Lanthier were preparing to present their report to the Hamilton Community Foundation, the same needs were being identified by youth and expressed to other community stakeholders. Youth attending the "Open Gym" at a local school were concerned by the fact that the program would end when the school closed for the summer. They expressed these concerns to Judy Kloosterman, a neighborhood resident who is heavily involved in community programming. Judy, who eventually became coordinator of the Youth Initiatives Project, also identified this need to representatives of the Hamilton Community Foundation.

In response to this identified need, the Hamilton Community Foundation organized a meeting of community stakeholders, including representatives from Hamilton Police Services, both the public and non-profit sectors and community residents. With a good sense of interest, commitment, and support from the group, the Hamilton Community Foundation made the decision to fund a process which would eventually result in *The Square*.

3.2 The Square

Through a process directed by a volunteer committee of community stakeholders, the concept of the *Youth Square* was developed and realized (this process will be discussed in depth under the section entitled: How did the Project Build Community Capacity?). The primary goal of the steering committee was "To provide a safe, violence-free, drug free place for youth to meet". To determine the success of this goal, a researcher from the SPRC visited *The Square* on three separate occasions. These visits allowed the researcher to both observe the environment

and engage in conversations with participants and volunteers. These conversations allowed the researcher to gather input and feedback from those directly involved with *The Square*.

Located on the southwest corner of the Eastgate Square parking lot in East Hamilton, *The Square* occupied sixty by ninety feet of fenced in space, furnished primarily through donations from local area businesses, individuals, and community groups. The space contained a concession stand, offering coffee and bottled water at a nominal fee (all revenue was put back into the project), a basketball net, sports equipment, a foosball table, a stereo system and a number of picnic tables. *The Square* was open to youth on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights from 8:00pm to 12:00am, and operated over a six-week period from mid-July to the end of August 2001.

Participants ranged in age from nine to nineteen, suggesting that *The Square* appealed to a wide age range. Attendance increased from about fifteen participants at the beginning of the six weeks, to about fifty by the end. Those who learned about *The Square* well into the program, wished that they had known of it earlier. While the majority of participants were from the immediate area, some traveled from as far as the central Hamilton and the Mountain.

The researcher observed that participants were never alone, always mingling with other youth and volunteers. While there were occasional arguments between youth, these were generally resolved by the youth themselves. No physical altercations were observed or reported, and there was no indication of drug or alcohol use on the site.

The Square provided an opportunity for young people to meet new people in a safe atmosphere.

As one participant wrote in a notebook provided for participant comments and suggestions, "I'm so happy to say that through you I've actually met friends, not enemies! Can you believe it?"

Other participants, who were new to Hamilton, enjoyed the opportunity to meet new friends before starting at a new school.

The most notable example of how *The Square* provided a safe and secure atmosphere was an observation made by one of the police officers volunteering at the site. Rival gang members who visited *The Square* sat together and had a coffee. From a community policing perspective, officers also noted that they were able to establish positive relationships with a number of youth over a short time period, which may have otherwise taken years.

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Part of the success of *The Square* was the fact that it was not only developed with direction from youth, but also that participants had the opportunity to plan and coordinate nightly activities. One participant, for example, coordinated a basketball tournament, while others planned events for the closing night. Participants identified in their discussions with the researcher that these opportunities were important, as they allowed participants to create their own environment. Even those who did not initiate activities felt that the fact that they had these options resulted in a feeling of ownership.

In terms of providing a safe, violence-free, drug-free place for youth to meet, *The Square* clearly met this goal. The following section of this report illustrates how, through a process of community development, the Youth Initiatives Project resulted in other benefits to the community.

4.0 HOW DID THE PROJECT INCREASE COMMUNITY CAPACITY?

In the case of the Youth Initiatives Project, community capacity refers to the ability of community stakeholders to address local issues with little outside support. Community capacity is also increased when community members, through their involvement in planning and organizing an initiative, learn valuable skills and confidence in their ability to affect change.

It is important to note that the Hamilton Community Foundation, as sponsor and primary funder of the Youth Initiatives Project, concentrated their support on facilitating a process of community development and capacity buildirg. With a budget of $5700, the majority ($3700) was dedicated to hiring a project coordinator, while the remainder was directed toward evaluation. The result of this approach to funding proved to be an excellent example of how, through a process of community development, contributions of resources and time can be coordinated to provide an effective response to a community need.

With respect to the list of six goals developed by the projects' volunteer steering committee, goals two through five focused on increasing community capacity. The committee realized the importance of involving youth in all aspects of the planning process, fostering community partnerships, facilitating youth leadership development, and evaluating and sharing successful practices and outcomes with the broader community.

The following sections demonstrate how each of these goals was achieved through the Youth Initiatives Project.

4.1 Youth Involvement in the Planning Process

Goal number two, as stated by the steering committee, was "To integrate youth in all parts of the planning and implementation process". During the early stages of the Youth Initiatives Project, youth members of the project steering committee provided insight and direction in developing the concept of *The Square*. Both participants and sponsors agreed that this was one of the main reasons that the project was so effective. Ultimately, *The Square* was designed by youth, for youth.

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Once *The Square* was opened to youth, the format was open to input and direction from participants. Youth attending *The Square* were encouraged to take a lead role in organizing events and activities.

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This provided participants with a sense of ownership and control over their environment, and ensured that nightly activities reflected the interests of youth.

4.2 Fostering Community Partnerships

The third goal developed by the steering committee was "To foster new partnerships and to seek out and collaborate with existing youth serving groups in the public, private and non-profit sector". Between volunteer members of the steering committee and outreach work conducted by the project coordinator, word of the initiative spread quickly through the community. To a great extent, the enthusiasm of those involved sparked a great deal of interest in the initiative. Representatives from public, private and non-profit sectors, as well as community residents were eager to contribute time and resources to the project.

As one key informant recounted, "the response was incredible, locals business owners were completely committed to the initiative, and asking how they could help".

As a result, *The Square* was completely furnished by donations from the community, from the fencing and tables, sporting equipment and refreshments, to a generator to run the lights and stereo (see APPENDIX A for a complete list of donations).

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While contributions to charitable causes are not uncommon among citizens and representatives of public and private sectors, unique dynamics were apparent in the support of the Youth Initiatives Project. Contributions were based on immediate needs identified by youth. Sponsors or donors became partners in the initiative, with a clear sense of how their support contributed to the final product: *The Square*.

4.3 Youth Leadership Development

The fourth goal of the project was "To facilitate youth leadership development". In conversations with youth participants there was a great sense of pride over the fact that this had considerable youth participation in its development. Through their involvement in the initiative, many area youth gained confidence and skills in community organizing and planning.

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The skills developed by youth involved in planning processes are highly transferable, and can applied to future initiatives and other aspect of life. In this sense, the goal of facilitating youth leadership development was certainly achieved.

4.4 Information Sharing

The fifth goal developed by the steering committee was "to evaluate and disseminate learnings from the project". Commitment to this goal was demonstrated by the Hamilton Community Foundation, which funded an external evaluation by the SPRC.

Evaluation is not only essential to understanding if an initiative was successful in meeting its goals, but also in identifying aspects and processes that contributed to positive outcomes. This report then, not only provides a record of a successful initiative, but also describes a process that could be replicated in other areas of the city.

5.0 WHAT ABOUT THE LONG-TERM NEEDS OF YOUTH?

While the feedback and experiences recounted by participants and key informants were all positive, there were concerns about the short-term nature of the initiative. Youth expressed interest in seeing *The Square* continue operating during the school year, moving to an indoor location during the winter months. They were also interested in extended hours, operating more than three nights a week.

During its six weeks of operation, *The Square* was successful in meeting the identified need to provide a safe, violence-free, drug-free place for youth to meet. This need however, still exists among youth in East Hamilton, as well as other areas in the city.

> ***The need to provide a safe, violence-free, drug-free place for youth to meet still exists among youth in East Hamilton, as well as other areas in the City.***

6.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on evaluation findings, the six goals developed by the steering committee for the Youth Initiatives Project were successfully addressed. While on the surface *The Square* seems like a relatively simple solution to address the needs of youth, a number of factors were crucial to its success.

One factor which contributed to the success of the initiative was that it was participant driven. This resulted in a sense of ownership among youth participants, and ensured that activities reflected the interests of youth. This sense of ownership was important in establishing a respectful atmosphere. As one informant identified, "respect" was a key feature of *The Square*, respect for other participants and respect for the property itself.

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Another factor not to be overlooked was the energy and commitment of the project coordinator (Judy Kloosterman). In approaching potential community partners, Judy was able to effectively convey the issues and identify specific ways in which partners could contribute to the initiative. In many cases, community partners seeing first hand how their support contributed to the success of the initiative became more closely involved in the planning process.

This coming together of public, private and non-profit sectors with area youth, contributed to a high level of commitment and energy among those involved, with energy leading to effective results. Other key players, including Constables Ingrassia and Lanthier, as well as the group of dedicated volunteers, also contributed to the energy, momentum and ultimate success of the initiative.

This report should be viewed not only as a record of a successful initiative which identifies and addresses the immediate needs of area youth, but also as an example of how diverse sectors of the community can be mobilized around a community issue, contributing time and resources to developing a solution.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF SPONSORS OF THE YOUTH INITIATIVES PROJECT

Name of Organization	Donation/Type of Service
Eastgate Square	Space Signage
Fortinos Supermarket Limited	Rental of Tent/Fencing
Tim Hortons	Coffee Sugar Cream Stir Stix Bottled Water Cleaning Supplies
Vaso Bujenovic	2 Weeks Hut Rental Cost
Hamilton East Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club	Footballs Financial Sponsorship
Rosedale Community Council	$300 to cover the cost of renting refreshment hut
Home Depot	10 Picnic Tables
City of Hamilton	Insurance costs Generator costs
Hamilton Community Foundation	Funds for Coordinator and Evaluation
Wal Mart	CD Player
Rick Kloosterman	Lights
YWCA	Basketball net
St. Vincent de Paul Society	Transportation of basketball net
Community Action Program for Children	Signage Meeting space
Hamilton East Lions Club	$1000 towards installation of tent/fencing
Arctic Glacier	Ice
United Rentals	generator